WOOLY

John Howard Griffin

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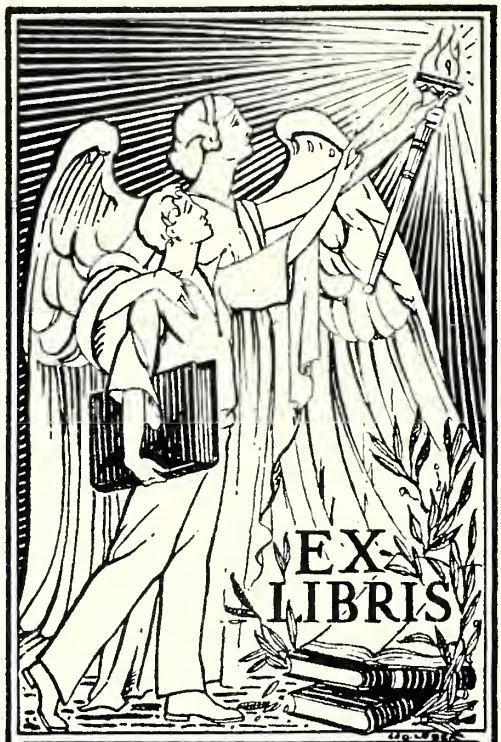

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HOUSE FOR THE BLIND

The Catholic World, v. 183, No. 1, 097, Aug. 1956 HV 2335 G copy one c.1

Wooly

by JOHN HOWARD GRIFFIN

"CAN'T you see nothin' at all?" the cab driver burst out almost belligerently.

"Not a thing."

"Well, I swear," he said, his voice changing to one of delight. "Can't see a thing, eh?"

"Nope," I answered defensively, ruffled that he seemed so outrageously pleased with my lack of sight.

As we drove toward town, he drew me into conversation with all the verve of a child with a new toy, and my resentment faded to vague curiosity. At least his enthusiasm for my blindness was a new experience, a change from the ordinary reactions of men.

HE talked incessantly, gleefully over his shoulder to me in the back seat, and I began to suspect that we were not going directly to town.

"Are you sure we're headed for—?"

"You're not in no hurry, are you?" he interrupted.

"Not particularly, but—"

"Well, I thought you might get a kick out of going in through the park. Everything's in bloom down there now. You can smell the blossims."

"But that's way out of the way."

"I'm not going to charge you extra—just for the straight trip."

After a moment he pulled the cab off the road and skidded his tires to a halt on the gravel shoulder.

"Hop out, Man."

"What for?"

"Come on, Man," he said, slamming his door and opening mine. "There's a great big old wild plum tree over here just covered with blossims. Come on. I'll take you over and you can smell it."

I STARTED to protest, but he was so pleased with his idea that I didn't have the heart. He grabbed my elbow to help me out and I sensed an immense, whisky-scented warmth in front of me. I let him half-lead, half-drag me across the gravel path to the tree. Its fragrance settled over me and I could hear the accelerating drone of bees in its branches.

"Take a whiff of that, Man," he urged in a croaking voice that sounded strangely gentle. Holding the back of my head with one hand,

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John Howard Griffin's interests are many and varied: he served as a language specialist with the Army during World War II in the Pacific; he lectures on Gregorian Chant, aesthetics, music and history; he has gained national recognition for his breeding of registered livestock, and he is a successful novelist. In 1947, as a result of combat injuries, he became blind which may well account for the deep understanding and warm feeling for people as evidenced in his present story.

he shoved a blossom-covered branch against my nose. "Ain't that the sweetest thing?"

"It sure is."

"I thought you'd maybe get a kick out of that. There's not nothin' smells so sweet as wild plum blossims."

When we started up again, I discovered that I was sitting beside him, that he had put me in the front seat.

In town he would not let me go into the stores alone as I am accustomed to doing. He insisted on parking the cab and then he hauled me around with a death grip on my arm. This kept me off balance and made me even clumsier than I would ordinarily be. I was on the verge of telling him that I could walk much better without help, when he said: "I really know how to take care of you, don't I?" with such eagerness that I couldn't find it in me to contradict him.

When he finally left me at my home, he said: "Look, call for me anytime. Just ask for Wooly. Tell them I'm the only one that knows how to take care of you."

"I'll do that," I said.

"Now, don't forget, will you?"—and it seemed to me that he was almost pleading with me. "Just call for Wooly."

For a moment I thought about his reaction and his attitude with a certain puzzlement, and then I forgot it under the pressure of the day's work.

Late in the afternoon I called for a cab to take me to a restaurant for supper. It did not occur to me to ask for Wooly. It pulled up in the driveway and honked and I went out to get in.

"Hi-yuh, Buddy. Gimme five!" the driver shouted in childish glee.

"Five what?" I asked, recognizing with a mixture of pleasure and irritation Wooly's coarse-grained voice.

"Five fingers. Shake hands, Man," he shouted as though I were his greatest friend. I shifted my cane to my left hand and offered him my right one. He pumped it for a moment and then once again put me in the front seat.

He explained that he had heard my address called out over the short-wave radio system the cab company uses to contact its drivers, and that he had broken in on the circuit to tell the dispatcher that I was blind and that he wanted to take the call. His exaggerated delight in my company once again mystified me.

When we stopped at the restaurant, he cut the motor and grew serious for the first time. He was trying to say something which was obviously painful for him.

"Do you—you know—imagine in your mind what people look like?"

"Not any more. I used to when I first lost my sight, but I never even think about it anymore."

"Well, how do you imagine somebody then?" he asked slowly.

"Oh, just by the way he acts."

"Well, how would you think I look?"

"Why, I don't know. I can tell you're a big man, and you're strong and probably overweight. . . ."

"That's right. But what about my face?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I know—but just guess," he insisted.

"I expect you've got a big, heavy-set face—probably red-nosed from your drinking."

"Do you think it's a good face or a—"

"Oh, I know it's a good face."

"Boy," he chuckled. "I don't know how you do it."

For several weeks, although I never asked for him, Wooly would break in whenever he heard my address over the dispatcher's radio and take the call. Each time, whether tight or sober, he acted the same, with such unexplainable delight that I became more and more mystified. Several times he took me through the park, and after the first few rides, I had to force him to take the fare; he didn't want to charge me for the ride.

All of this played such a small part in my life that I gave it little thought. I rather enjoyed it and was as pleasant as possible in an offhand way, but I was always more or less embarrassed by his effusiveness.

Then one day I called for a cab and another driver came for me. I wondered about it, but didn't say anything because it really wasn't important one way or the other.

However, when this happened several times, and I was surprised to note that I was missing our strange trips together, I began to fear that something had happened to him.

I decided to call the manager of the cab company and learn if Wooly were perhaps sick or had had an accident. I picked up the phone and dialed the number.

"Do you know a driver there named Wooly?" I asked, feeling somewhat foolish.

"Yeah? . . ."

"Well, he used to drive me a good bit, and—"

"Don't worry. He won't anymore," he snapped. "We fired him a few weeks back."

"What for?"

"Are you kidding? Didn't you call in to complain?"

"No—he was always nice to me."

"I never heard of him being nice to anybody. He was a hot-head. We lost too much business on account of him."

"Well, I can't understand that. He was wonderful to me. Do you know where he is?"

"Sure don't. I think he left town. He never stayed in any one place very long."

"Why not?"

"Couldn't hold a job. He couldn't get along with anybody."

I thanked him and was about to hang up when it occurred to me to ask: "Say—do you know where he lived here?"

"I think he had a room over at the old Majestic, but I'm sure he's gone now."

The next time I rode a cab, I asked the driver about Wooly. He affirmed what the manager had said: that nobody could stand Wooly, that he was the hardest man to get along with he'd ever seen.

Was this the same man who had made me smell the plum "blossims," who had offered to take me fishing, who had treated me with the greatest kindness and generosity? What was the riddle to this strange man that would allow him to show only the finest traits to me and only the most terrible ones to the rest of the world? It couldn't have been because he felt sorry for me; in fact, I recalled how mystified I once was that he could be so jubilant over my blindness. The conflict between their facts and my ex-

perience intrigued me until it grew over the weeks from a vague preoccupation into a fairly large mystery in my mind. And as my bewilderment grew, so did my determination to solve the riddle. I decided to go down to the skid row hotel and see if I could uncover the answer there.

The desk clerk talked through loose-fitting false teeth, in an over-the-counter conniving way.

"He was kinda like a hermit-like," he said. "He didn't never talk to nobody, never sat down here in the lobby like the others—nothing like that."

"What did he do in the evenings?" I asked.

"Oh — every day he'd come in after work, about six or six-thirty. He'd buy a sandwich and a bottle of milk over at the cigar stand behind you. And he'd get a newspaper. And I believe that was all. Then, he'd carry all of that and go right on up to his room and stay by hisself."

He said Wooly had no personal possessions except a small bedside radio, "and you could hear it playing those moony, sad-like music programs late at night."

"Didn't he have any family?"

"Not's I know of. He sure never had any company."

"Is that all you know about him?"

"That's about all. He just didn't have anything to do with anybody. Oh—but about once a week, he'd come down about ten at night and walk across the street there to the Palace and see the late movie."

I left the hotel full of guilt that I had once been so irritated by this lonely man's overtures of friendship. His life was becoming known to me in fragments of information, and it was forming a desolate picture. Yet there had never been any hint of that with me, nothing but good humor and a childish affection which I had not bothered to return.

He was really three different persons, from what I could gather. On the job he was an active bully, thoroughly detested by all who knew him. At the hotel he was a solitary, keeping to himself, eating his sandwich and milk in his room alone, listening to his bedside radio, going out to break the monotony occasionally with a late movie. With me he was all sunlight and happiness. I thought of him very often, and it became a matter of routine for me to ask whichever driver I happened to be riding with anything he might know about Wooly.

Not long ago, when I was talking with one of them and hearing again that Wooly was the surliest of men, the question popped out. "Well, what did he look like? I mean, what kind of an expression did he . . .?"

"Oh, he was uglier'n sin."

"He was?"

"Lord, yes. He had that great big red scar running clear across his face, you know."

"A scar?"

"Yeah—it was awful. You only had to look at him to get cold chills, and when he smiled, you'd get sick."

I didn't ask any more questions. I got sick for a different reason, because I hadn't known. As I thought about it, I realized that there was the answer, the missing fragment to the picture. Wooly was on the defensive against people who drew back in horror from his deformity. It soured him with people until he apparently hated the whole world

because the world could not see beyond a man's face. That explained his jubilation that I could not see, his expansive happiness in my company.

All of them had said that I really didn't know Wooly, but now I am sure that I am the only one who did know him; for in all of that lonely life of his, the only time when he could really be what he was as a man were those moments spent with me. Then and only then was the tremendous barrier of his defensiveness against his ugliness made unnecessary. With me he was like any other man. With me, he must have realized that his face couldn't blind me to the quality of his heart.

Singing Streams

by RONAELE HUNT

THROUGH shadowy canyons streams go singing on their way
Toward mothering seas; perhaps remembering when they
Were drops of rain refreshing earth; or flakes of snow
That tucked her snugly in till life-blood flowed again,
And she was warm and sweet, and hills grew green, and birds
Returned to sing and nest, glad to be home again.

All sounds are hushed in the immensity of space;
And one can feel the steady rhythmic pulse from that
Great Heart which governs all the silent universe,
Where time unmeasured flows, and life is limitless.

How exquisite the songs, how perfect is the plan!
So much to love, so short the span. Sunlighted days,
The darkness comforted by stars and Lady Moon
Seeing little peace these countless centuries.

Dr. Cronin: An Essay in Victoriana

by FRANCIS FYTTON

DR. CRONIN is a Victorian. At sixty he is only just old enough to be so classified; but in literature he is pure Victorian—pure as Dickens or Thackeray or, as he himself might prefer, as his fellow-Scot, Stevenson.

Being a Victorian does not of course mean merely the wearing of a silk hat, frock coat, elastic-sided boots and side whiskers of the type popularized by the late Lord Dundreary; in fact I am reliably informed that Dr. Cronin wears none of these things. But it does mean an attitude of mind, particularly of the creative mind, that is calculated to produce that strange half-epic half-comic mutation of English Letters, the Victorian novel.

THE Victorian novel is now become a period piece, a literary curiosity, an artistic dodo. Even Dickens, perhaps particularly Dickens, almost I am tempted to say, because of Dickens. Anyway we (by which I mean the English critics on whose behalf I have no authority to speak) are all agreed that the Victorian novel was a product of its era, popularized by the immense leisure enjoyed by the English middle classes and the lack of the cinema, radio and television (was the theater never a competitor, I wonder?), something that could never be repeated. That, at least, is my conclusion after reading the reviews of my more eminent contemporaries over the past ten years.

So that it is all the more strange to find that ever since 1931 Archibald Joseph Cronin has been producing such novels and enjoying a phenomenal success.

THE answer to this conundrum is religion. For religion—as exemplified by the Bible—is a best-seller. And Dr. Cronin is nothing if not religious though the form of his religion has often been a matter of concern, discussion and comment by his fellow-Catholics.

In this of course he is typically a Victorian author. All the Victorians were religious, even to the point of atheism. By which I mean that if they happened to be atheists they did not put it forward as a doubt or a theory (and no intelligent, calm man confronted by his inexplicable self in an inexplicable universe could do more) but as a religion complete with dogma and moral code. It was not that they were unintelligent; they were simply anything but calm! they were in fact fanatics.

If it was the era of Darwin it was also the era of Newman; and be-

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Francis Fytton gives us a study of A. J. Cronin the person, as apart from his books, and discusses his religious thinking since his return to the Faith. Dr. Cronin's recently published novel, *A Thing of Beauty*, is already high on the best-seller lists.

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